

The Case for a Simpler Life-Style

"A new pattern of living is emerging in America," says this distinguished conservationist. "In its emphasis on simplicity, self-reliance and thrift may well lie the key to our survival"

BY LAURANCE S. ROCKEFELLER

THE growing national concern for a better environment and a simpler life-style is already improving America's physical surroundings. It may be a major new moral and spiritual resource as well.

The last dozen years have been as traumatic and divisive as any in our history. Assassinations, a tragic war, and political and economic upheaval have divided and dismayed this country.

In order to face problems like these, a democracy needs themes and

common goals which bring unity and commitment. The emerging ecological ethic and the changes in life-style which accompany it may be such a force.

Some may think it ironic that one who has been blessed with a large measure of material resources should be advocating a simpler life-style. Actually, it is, in my view, entirely consistent. The tradition of the value of work runs deep in our family's heritage. My father and grandfather always taught us that

waste was a sin no matter how great one's resources.

More and more people are coming to understand that man must live in harmony with nature and not as its adversary. The concept that we have boundless resources of materials, manpower and spirit, and therefore can afford waste, clearly no longer is true. Individually, people are finding that a simpler life-style provides greater satisfaction than relentless pursuit of materialism.

A simpler life-style is a relative term which means different things in different lives. Basically, it involves reducing waste, and employing physical as well as mental and spiritual capacities to the fullest. It does not necessarily involve radical change. For most, it does not mean renouncing modern conveniences and returning completely to nature.

It does mean opening up some form of communication with nature. It does mean reducing reliance on mechanical things and discovering the joy of self-reliance and the satisfaction of physical work. For instance, out of my own experience I know that chopping and splitting firewood can bring not only complete physical involvement but also spiritual and mental relaxation and reward.

An environmental ethic holds that man must live as part of the natural world. He must treat the land, water and air as links in a vital chain upon which life depends. Man already prevails, but will he survive? He must go beyond the concern necessary for

his own survival to that required for all other living creatures. Thus, ecology and ethics merge, interact and reinforce each other in what Albert Schweitzer called "reverence for life."

Put another way, the science of ecology tells us pragmatically that we cannot continue to waste, and the ethics of our Judeo-Christian tradition tell us that morally we should not.

Americans in growing numbers are finding that satisfaction of material wants does not necessarily bring a sense of lasting well-being. Many long for something which will give a greater sense of purpose and meaning to their lives.

Myths and misconceptions about a simpler life-style, usually based on the drug-centered behavior of alienated "pseudo-practitioners," have turned some people off. Such behavior does not truly represent this philosophy. An environmental ethic is not an aberrant departure from, but a natural evolution of, a maturing American society. Let's look at the factors which make it part of the mainstream of American thought:

1. Far from spelling deprivation and hardship, a simpler life-style can well mean a more pleasant and even a more comfortable life. Some may choose dramatically austere or esthetic life-styles as their way, but for most a more simple way will need to involve only modest shifts. Exchanging time in front of a television set or in a car for time in physical activity closer to na-

ture is not sacrifice; it's enrichment. Writes the perceptive bacteriologist René Dubos:

"We shall not go back to the Stone Age nor give up the priceless contributions of technology. But as we worry about shortages of resources and energy, we can derive comfort from the fact that many groups of people at all stages of history have been at least as healthy and as happy as we are, and have achieved great feats of civilization, with techniques and materials that are extremely primitive according to our criteria."

2. Over a century ago such classically American thinkers as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson were preaching the values of self-reliance and living in harmony with nature. They understood that man was chosen as a steward for other living things and the earth, not as an exploiter.

Here is Thoreau preaching the doctrine a century ago:

"If a man walks in the woods for love of them, half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed as an industrious and enterprising citizen."

3. A simpler way of life can be practiced in the cities as well as the country. Many economies and sensible practices are equally applicable in towns, suburbs and rural areas. Wise planning, and the intelligent use and control of our air, water

and land are equally important to the quality of life in both the city and the country. It is the sense of being part of nature and not its enemy that is important.

4. The return to more simple and less-wasteful living is entirely consistent with economic growth. For example, the energy crisis creates markets as well as problems. To use less energy, we need more solar-heating units, more insulation, more mass-transit cars and tracks. Major changes in manufacturing processes to save energy call for investment and jobs, the very stuff of which growth is made.

We often hear that environmental-control measures cause industries to close and jobs to be lost. On balance, this need not be the case. Minimizing water and air pollution and cleaning up our cities is creating thousands and thousands of new jobs in this country.

5. The new approach to life fits right in with our concern for the disadvantaged. Too many people still do not have enough of the basic elements required for even a modestly rewarding existence. Complex problems of distribution are involved here, but that part of the gross national product which is used to provide food, housing and the basic necessities for the poor must grow. The same is true for that part of the world which is still poor. More simple, less demanding, less wasteful living by the advantaged is not inconsistent with this form of growth. If advantaged Americans

make fewer demands on limited resources, there will, in the long run, be more for those who now have access to very little, both in this country and throughout the world.

6. Science and technology can be our greatest allies in reducing waste in the production of energy and in industry. Today, we obtain only about four percent of our total energy supply from renewable sources. We must now shift from our reliance upon such non-renewable resources as hydrocarbons and metals to such renewable ones as wood, water power, solar energy, wind, waves and tides and the heat of the earth. Finding ways to use these plentiful, clean and *renewable* sources of energy efficiently is a high-priority challenge. Finding less-expensive and cleaner ways to use coal, of which we have a vast, untapped supply, could drastically reduce our reliance on imported fuels.

Recycling and re-use of non-renewable resources play a large role in eliminating waste. Municipal garbage alone could supply an appreciable part of municipal energy needs if we applied scientific and technological skills to solve the problem.

But what about individual people? What can they do to put a simpler approach to life into practice? Examples readily come to mind.

- More and more people are walking to work or riding bicycles. In the process, they're saving fuel and money, and they're finding that they also feel better. Many people who are now buying cars are look-

ing for smaller ones, and rediscovering the economy of the four-cylinder engine.

- There is a general movement toward participating in all manner of sports, a beneficial change from being passive spectators. People are hiking, camping, cross-country skiing, jogging, swimming and in general enjoying outdoor living in vastly increasing numbers.

- Simple old-fashioned habits of thrift and self-reliance are reappearing in many forms. Some of these are quite ordinary. For instance, many of us have discovered that leaving lights on unnecessarily is a habit that cannot be justified by either convenience or necessity. The great surge of interest in handcrafts illustrates an inward longing for self-sufficiency as well as self-expression. People are starting to save food by refusing to take more on their plate than they really want or need.

- Finally, there is a growing awareness of the importance of family planning. We are coming to understand the crucial relationship between the number of people living on this globe and the continued availability of our limited natural resources.

In total, this all adds up to a new pattern of living—one that is essential to the well-being of individuals and of the nation. If we do not follow it voluntarily and democratically, it may be forced upon us. Some economists and analysts argue that, if we continue consuming resources as we are now, the only way to bring

about a balance between demand and supply will be through authoritarian controls. Robert Heilbroner, the distinguished economist, is particularly pessimistic about the capacity of a democratic and capitalist state to impose the discipline necessary to survive in a world of scarcity.

In summary, a simpler life-style and a national commitment to an environmental ethic can help America overcome its material and spiritual crises. Although we think of ourselves as pragmatic and unphilosophical, Americans have always been heavily influenced by what is morally right. The really large events in our history have centered on spiritual values.

The Revolution of 1776, the Civil War, World Wars I and II were all fought for reasons other than conquest or material gain. After each conflict, America exerted itself to make secure what had been at issue in the fighting. We did build a new nation and a new form of government after 1776. Although movement has been too slow, we have been spreading the right to human dignity since the Civil War. After World War II, we have made the greatest efforts in history to help

other nations.

During the tragedies of the past decade, we used our institutions to correct mistakes. We changed a war policy, and we changed a President. It was difficult and divisive but we did it, not for material gain, but to express our moral values.

Now we are faced with the *moral* challenge of simplifying our overly complicated, overly wasteful lives and forging a national commitment to an environmental ethic. We must do this to protect the limited resources on which all life depends. If we do it well, this personal and national commitment *can* enhance the spiritual life of every one of us.

Further, we shall be forging a basis of common commitment and shared goals which will lend basic strength to this nation. It is from such common efforts that democracies draw the strength and develop the moral fiber and self-discipline they need to renew themselves and meet the political, social and economic challenges that now confront them.

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